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Picked from the Pews: A Religiously Inspired Book Collection

Jennifer Greenberg

Washington University in St. Louis

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Picked from the Pews: A Religiously Inspired Book Collection

The Sabbath, in my opinion, should be referred to as the day of reading, not the day of rest. It is when I, throughout my youth, powered through stacks of tween fiction collected from the library the prior Thursday. It is when my family would stay up together after Friday night dinner to read in the living room rather than recede to our bedrooms for rest after a long week. It is when I, at college, catch up on my ‘fun’ reading, keeping my course readings packed away in my backpack. When technology, travel, and work are prohibited, books become saviors. Being observant of the Jewish Sabbath, its laws, and restrictions, has always carried the perk of membership in a reading culture and driven me to collect books that maintain the holy mood of the day, cause me to think about my Jewish practice, and teach me about the institution of religion that I have always held so close.

Three-hour services in synagogue every Saturday call for some much-needed distraction. As a child, after exhausting the entertainment of drawing on the suede cushions of my bench, I would often turn to books I brought from home. As I grew older, the canonical texts that always sat in from of me in each row attracted my interest. Initially, the books of the Old Testament, or the Tanakh, were a source of play. My friends and I would look at the maps of Ancient Israel and play I-Spy with city names or count how many times a certain Hebrew letter appeared on a page. But then the text itself, with its stories, characters, odd laws, and lengthy genealogies with bizarre names, captivated me. I would follow along as a portion was chanted in Hebrew each week and studied it in Jewish day school as well. The pocket-size copy of the *JPS Tanakh* given to me at my high school graduation, though far too large to fit in anyone’s reasonably-sized pocket, has a place of honor on my night stand, placed on top of any other book I am in the

process of reading. This is how the Tanakh became the book that I have read and referenced more frequently than any other.

The study of canonical texts was so closely tied to my personal observance of religion that my Saturday book list turned into a search to figure out why I chose to live according to the guidelines of an ancient and somewhat mysterious book. My sources ranged from a children's illustrated version of *Pirkei Avot*, a collection of rabbis' ethical teachings, to *The Essential Talmud* by Adin Steinsaltz, an explanation of the interpretation of Jewish law. I even delved into *The Zohar*, the mystical Kabbalistic text which I will admit was too lofty for me to study in any non-academic or non-historical way. Of the books I chose to find more meaning in living a Jewish life, Abraham Joshua Heschel's *The Sabbath* most strongly delivered what I was looking for. It is a beautifully poetic description of the significance of the Sabbath and its relation to humanity, time, and space. I read it one Sabbath afternoon until the glow of the setting sun, signaling the end of the Sabbath, led me to its final pages. There was nothing quite like reading about the beauty of the Sabbath on the Sabbath. It remains one of my most powerful reading experiences and one that I fantasize about recreating each week. While some inspired and others complicated Jewish practice, these books informed my behavior, encouraging me to act not only for the sake of tradition but to find other meaning in practice and ritual. Moreover, these books were ideal for Friday night and Saturday, my day of rest and reading. They focused my mind on the very activity that I was executing and added a level of spirituality to an already sacred day.

A more analytical reading of religion and observance followed the spiritual one when I came to college and was confronted with both skepticism of and passion for religion from peers. I asked, and continue to ask myself, how religion compares to other methods of interpreting the world and human behavior. Why do I prioritize religion above other methods and how does this

shape my opinions? A philosophical, sociological, and psychological investigation was in order. As a Religious Studies major, I have had the opportunity to read texts for class that transform into thoughts and conversations I have over the Sabbath. My friends have been forced to engage with my musings on *Purity and Danger* by Mary Douglas, *The Future of an Illusion* by Sigmund Freud, and *The Varieties of Religious Experience* lectures by William James. As we admire Freud's skepticism and James' will to believe, I realize that it has been valuable for me to read books outside of the system and evaluate Judaism from a different vantage point. I have even recommended James' lectures to friends upon seeing them struggle to understand the messages of Jewish texts they study. Judaism does not deliver answers as simply as we would all like, so I have welcomed any help in evaluating tough questions that Judaism at least succeeds in asking.

At this point in my religious and academic journeys, the two paths have blurred edges to some extent. I now read to learn in addition to reading for answers or inspiration. My current quest explores Jewish history and its interaction with and impact on secular society. One of my Sabbath books, *Rebbe*, by Joseph Telushkin, has let me spend afternoons with the fascinating Lubavitcher Rebbe, whose goals of bringing Judaism to as many Jews as possible are evident in Chabad houses across the globe. Jonathan Sarna's *American Judaism* fell into my lap as a source for a research paper but thrilled me into completing it on Saturday afternoons past the end of the academic year. My current nightstand book is *Jewish Rights, National Rites Nationalism and Autonomy in Late Imperial and Revolutionary Russia* by Simon Rabinovitch, which is inspired by my interest in Jewish communities of Eastern Europe and study of Russian language. It somehow seems appropriate to be spending my restful Saturdays reading books on topics of religion, philosophy, or Judaism. Books have become a part of my Sabbath observance as much

as lighting candles or attending synagogue are: a ritual to maintain the sanctity of the day while learning about the religion it is tied to.

The nature of Jews as “The People of the Book,” and my growth into a person of many books is not coincidental. While Judaism has practically given me a day devoted to reading, it more importantly has given me reason to read. Beginning with my fundamental relationship with the Tanakh, I have read because it is what my community does every week at synagogue and in order to live by God’s commandments. I continued to read because of the questions Judaism raises and the texts its scholars produce to answer them. But it is because I understand Judaism to encourage questioning and learning that I have gone beyond its own production of knowledge to learn about its place and influence in the world.

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